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A COUNTERTERRORISM STORY:
A Review of the Counterterrorism Policy of the United States

by

Douglas E. Macfarlane

Colonel, United States Army

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Douglas E. Macfarlane

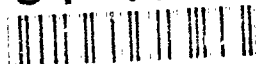
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Abstract of
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A Review of the Counterterrorism Policy of the United States

The Special Operations Command forces of the United States are fully capable of conducting hostage rescue operations with a reasonable chance of success; however, the National Command Authorities are reluctant to implement this aspect of our strategy by committing them in this role. A review of the history of combat rescue operations by the United States indicates an invariable lack of success. Yet, other countries have achieved great accomplishments in similar hostage situations. Even though other countries and police departments within the United States routinely do so, our policy does not allow for negotiation with terrorists. This leaves us with no response to terrorism. If the United States is to deter terrorists from taking our citizens prisoner, we have two choices. The National Command Authorities must be prepared either to commit our counterterrorist forces to retrieve hostages or we must be willing to negotiate with terrorists to gain the release of those who have been kidnaped. Both of these options have produced good results when used by others; we should be prepared to do the same.

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A COUNTERTERRORISM STORY:
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Mr. President, I have to advise you that one of our military attaches is missing and, presumably, in the hands of terrorists." The Secretary of State let the President digest this news before he continued. "At six o'clock this morning, Colonel Smythe Forrest, our attache in Mohavia, was on his way to work at the embassy when his car was stopped by personnel dressed as city police. Apparently they persuaded him to get out of the car on some pretext, at which point they kidnaped him. The Ambassador is trying to find out more about the situation, and he will give me an update no later than three o'clock this afternoon. I'll brief you further at that time."

The President paused in reflection for a moment, his mind on other matters more important than Colonel Forrest. "Thanks Bill. I don't think this is too serious but just in case you might bring the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman when you come back."

The President's seeming lack of concern could be attributed to several reasons. There is a good chance that when all of the facts of the incident are known, it will not turn out to be a legitimate hostage situation. On the other hand, he may have been farsighted enough to realize that if Colonel Forrest was indeed a terrorist hostage, there was little he could do to help the man. The government has done an excellent job over the years in respect to anti-terrorism, those defensive measures used to reduce the vulnerability of individuals and property to terrorism.¹ But he was fully aware that our record of employing

direct action forces in response to terrorist acts was universally poor.

Our Special Operations Command forces are ready and willing to conduct missions in support of the President's counterterrorist policy and they are properly structured to assure a reasonable chance of success in performing combat rescues. However, the National Command Authorities, comprised of the President and the Secretary of Defense, are reluctant to commit them in this role. If we are not prepared to employ these elite forces, then we are not willing to implement a key aspect of our policy in responding to terrorism. This leaves the United States with an ineffective counterterrorist strategy which puts our citizens at risk.

CHAPTER II

A SHORT HISTORY OF TERRORISM

At precisely three o'clock, Secretary of State William Wilson entered the President's office. He was followed by the Secretary of Defense, Donald Shocklee, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Gary Strazensky, United States Army.

The President seemed to be in a good mood as he shook hands all around. He paused for a moment in front of General Strazensky and looked him squarely in the eyes, trying to get a sensing of the magnitude of the problem. He had appointed the General to the position less than two months earlier and was not yet convinced he had made the right choice. The General's face, with thirty years of practice, revealed nothing.

"Bill, I see you brought Don and Gary with you. Is this a bad sign?" The President was attempting to be humorous with the remark, but it was his way of trying to relax the churning in his own stomach.

"Well Sir, it may be." The President's insides immediately began to tighten. "This situation is developing with some rapidity," the Secretary replied. "It seems as though Colonel Forrest has indeed been captured and is being held as a hostage by a group of Parumphs loyal to Krasnovia."

"Do we have any idea what's behind all this, Bill? Things have been pretty quiet in Mohavia lately."

"No Sir, I have received some briefings recently that the Krasnovians are upset with our sale of stinger missiles to Mohavia; but we advised them that they were to be used to improve the air defense posture around some new military facilities being constructed close to the Krasnovian border. Other than that, I can't imagine their motive."

"Briefly refresh me on the general political situation over there. I barely remember whose side we're on." It was obvious to everyone that the President had other ways he wanted to spend his time.

The Secretary continued, "The Parumphs are a small ethnic minority in the region and their country, Parumphstan, borders both Mohavia and Krasnovia. As a

result of the Krasnovia-Mohavia War in 1924 they are now part of Mohavia although they most closely resemble Krasnovia, the country to which they were allied before the war, in respect to culture and religion. Both Mohavia and Krasnovia have encouraged the tribes of Parumphstan to conduct insurgency operations into the other's country. Until recently, our support to Mohavia has been financial and logistical, but we have begun using advisors to assist them in developing a small unit training program which has started to show signs of success. The net result is that the Mohavian effort is beginning to have an effect on the Krasnovian government which, until now, has been the more successful of the two countries in their insurgency operations."

The Secretary of Defense interjected, "Our proposed sale of stingers to Mohavia seems to have been perceived as a major threat to Krasnovia in regard to balance of power in the region. It appears that Parumphs loyal to them captured Colonel Forrest, and my guess is that they will try to use him to get us to reverse our decision to sell the stingers to Mohavia."

The President was quiet for a moment and after a noticeable pause said in an agitated voice, "And now Colonel Forrest becomes the pawn in the game. We either give in to their demands or let him die."

General Strazensky spoke for the first time. "Or we can implement our counterterrorist strategy and rescue him!"

Terrorism has become a fact of life for our country over the last twenty years. In 1972, the world watched on television as the Black September group took nine Israeli Olympic athletes hostage in Munich and eventually massacred them. This horrible tragedy showed that such acts can be a powerful weapon, intended to "shock, stun, or intimidate target groups wider than the immediate victims".²

In the years since then, the United States has become especially vulnerable to these attacks because we have been

perceived as unamenable to negotiate with terrorists, unable to react in a timely manner to rescue hostages, and unwilling to retaliate against those who were responsible for the act. These perspectives on the part of the National Command Authorities assure that terrorism, to include hostage-taking, will continue to pose a threat to Americans.

Prior to the killing of the Olympic athletes at Furstenfeldbruck Military Airport, our national policy on terrorism had not been clearly defined. However, since 1972 successive Presidents have spent considerable effort to determine how best to deal with this emotional issue. In 1986, President Reagan directed Vice President Bush to chair a task force on combating terrorism with the goal of developing clear guidelines regarding our actions in this arena. The task force final report recommended that we make no concessions to terrorists and respond to terrorist acts with every available resource.³ Since then, these tenets have become the cornerstone of our policy; however, they allow for no response other than direct action. The success of this strategy hinges upon highly motivated special operations forces which are prepared to conduct combat rescue missions.

Our counterterrorist forces are a part of the Special Operations Command, a unified command of the Department of Defense, consisting of elements from the Army, Navy, and Air Force.⁴ The most publicized unit of the force, although little is known about their activities, is Delta Force. It is a joint task force consisting of highly trained and specially equipped

personnel from the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This unit is the primary direct action force which would be employed to resolve terrorist incidents outside the United States. They are as well equipped and trained as any comparable organization in the world and are capable of being deployed in a matter of hours."

CHAPTER III

THE COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES

The President shot the General a hard look. "Are you seriously suggesting that we rush in there to try and rescue this officer? Gary, how can we possibly justify such a rash action which has the distinct possibility of costing many lives?"

"Mr. President," the Chairman began, "I have just finished a series of orientation briefings from my people on this subject and our record in responding to terrorism has been pitiful. We are perceived by the world community as a country that doesn't react to terrorist activity except with hollow rhetoric. The consensus is that our stated policy of direct action against terrorists in no way resembles what we are actually prepared to do. I must say candidly that I fear for Colonel Forrest's life because we are not willing to do what is necessary to get him away from his captors. I feel that we can only secure his release by negotiating with the Parumths and Mohavia on the stinger sale or by conducting a raid to retrieve him."

"Those are two courses of action I am not prepared to consider," said the President with ice in his voice. "It would violate our national policy." He was beginning to wonder about Strazensky's desire to be a team player.

The General, more astute than the President realized, saw immediately that he had the President's full attention. He also knew that what he told the President now could have a far-reaching effect on him personally. Strazensky began to feel that he had made the right decision to rent rather than buy his house in Bethesda.

"Look at our track record here, Sir. It doesn't align with our policy on terrorism."

"Suppose you support that observation with facts, General. And take your time, my schedule has just been freed up for the rest of the day."

General Strazensky now keenly aware that the President was highly agitated by his remarks, began a

methodical, informed review of our counterterrorist policy...

The United States government defines counterterrorism as the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism. The heart of the program is a five point attack plan which entails (1) overt and covert intelligence operations designed to predict, deter, and respond to terrorist incidents; (2) diplomatic efforts designed to foster international cooperation, which the United States believes is critical to dealing with terrorism in the long term; (3) economic steps to increase the pressure on regimes aiding or abetting terrorism; (4) legislative efforts designed to tighten U.S. criminal statutes to increase the penalty for involving Americans in a terrorist act; and (5) military operations designed to punish those responsible for attacks against Americans."

The two key aspects of our strategy for dealing with hostages are that we will make no concessions of any sort and that we will respond to terrorist acts by direct action and retaliation. The United States has been inconsistent in enforcing our counterterrorist policy by not rigorously applying these measures to hostage situations involving American citizens. The National Command Authorities tend to adjust the strategy depending upon such things as whether the event occurs on foreign soil or in the United States, whether the Americans involved are private citizens or government employees, and whether the possibility of an adverse outcome exists.

Our strategy is different when confronting terrorists in the United States as compared to in a foreign country. In January 1977, a group of Hanafi Muslims seized the B'nai B'rith building in Washington, D.C. and took several hostages. Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, and the city police considered a rescue attempt, they allowed three Muslim ambassadors stationed in Washington to negotiate with the terrorists. The hostages were released after concessions were made to their captors.⁷

This incident contrasts with our strict adherence to strategy regarding the American hostages held in Beirut by Shiite Moslem extremists. Terry Anderson, who was captured on March 16, 1984 and several others who were captured since then, remain in captivity without benefit of negotiation on our part. However, in contravention to public statements that we will not negotiate for their release, it appears that secret discussions have been conducted with Iran to attempt to secure their freedom.⁸

Although this violates our strategy, the decision to arbitrate on their behalf could prove to be beneficial. A considerable body of evidence exists which indicates that negotiations conducted by trained personnel will most likely produce a timely, nonviolent conclusion to the situation. The New York City police department has encountered more than 400 such situations since 1980 without the loss of a single hostage or hostage taker.⁹

The counterterrorist strategy in respect to hostage rescue attempts is different when the hostages are private citizens as compared to diplomats, government employees, and our military personnel. Private citizens have been rescued or negotiated for quite routinely over the years. For example, in 1979 H. Ross Perot hired retired Colonel "Bull" Simons, famous for planning and leading the raid on Son Tey, to get oil workers out of Iran. The mission was a complete success.¹⁰ In 1990, Scott Heimdal, a private citizen from Peoria, Illinois was released by Colombian guerrillas after his town paid a ransom of \$35,000.¹¹ In both instances the government was neither willing to negotiate with the responsible parties nor was any consideration given to conducting a hostage rescue.

Government employees have not been as fortunate. In 1972 Dan Mitrone, a foreign service officer, was taken hostage and eventually executed in Uruguay by an insurgent terrorist group.¹² Ambassador Cleo Noel and U.S. diplomat George Moore were captured by terrorists in 1973 while in Khartoum. President Nixon refused to negotiate for their release, so they were murdered.¹³ John Patterson, another Foreign Service officer, was killed in 1974 while serving as a consul in Mexico. Patterson's case was further compounded by the fact that his family raised the ransom required for his release but the United States government refused to cooperate with his captors.¹⁴ Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel William Higgins, a United Nations observer, was taken hostage in

1989 and eventually killed without the benefit of negotiation or a rescue attempt on his behalf.¹⁸

The fact that the United States is hesitant to conduct direct action missions to retrieve hostages is difficult to justify. Companies which have American workers in foreign countries are prepared to conduct rescues for good reason. They would have a difficult time recruiting workers for overseas work if they held to the same policy that the United States government attempts to enforce. Based on this attitude, it is more dangerous to be an American diplomatic official or a member of the armed forces stationed overseas than a civilian working for a private organization.

CHAPTER IV

OUR LEGACY OF HOSTAGE RESCUE

The President gave an audible sigh when the Chairman finished his briefing. "Gary, it's obvious that you believe we have not done a good job handling hostages in the past, but I empathize with my predecessors when I say that we can't deal with these people in a rational manner. They will see our negotiations as a sign of weakness and, if we capitulate in order to save a few people, then terrorism will be legitimized as a means to achieve their objectives."

"Sir, I strongly disagree with that assessment. Your attitude negates our counterterrorist strategy completely," General Strazensky said. "We need to open a dialogue with these people immediately and, at the same time, alert our counterterrorist people to get ready to rescue Forrest. This way we establish some rapport with the Parumphs and, hopefully, keep the Colonel alive until we can get him out." He saw how his words registered with the President and mentally began selecting the songs he would ask to be played at his retirement ceremony.

Exasperated, the President turned to the Secretary of State. "Bill, I don't like the idea of negotiating with terrorists and I am not the least bit convinced that our Special Operations guys have the ability to pull off such a mission. But I'm willing to discuss this further. Get an update on Colonel Forrest's situation, and we'll review our options first thing in the morning. Be prepared to refresh me on the results of our previous hostage rescue attempts at that time. As you review the feasible options, please keep in mind that the criterion for success in combat operations has changed significantly since Vietnam. In that war, the measure of effectiveness was the number of enemy soldiers we were able to kill. Today, it is the number of American lives we can preserve."

Strazensky, in a moment of impertinence, responded, "I assume that includes Colonel Forrest, Mr. President!"

The President did not respond, but his gaze indicated to them that they were dismissed. As they

headed for the door he said, "I'll expect you here tomorrow also, General."

The fact that the President had not called the Chairman by his first name was not lost on any of the men. Strazensky knew he had played his last game of tennis on the Presidential court.

Today, any decision to commit special operations forces in hostage rescue situations is tempered by our previous absence of success. Even before the creation of Delta Force, the United States had shown the world that it was ineffective when conducting combat rescue missions. The attempted recovery of the crew of the ship Mayaguez in May 1975 was a calamity resulting in 39 Marines killed trying to rescue 38 crewmen, all of whom had been released by their captors several hours earlier and were in no danger of being harmed.¹⁶

Delta Force's first publicized mission, the Iran rescue attempt, was conducted by the most highly skilled and best trained warriors in our armed forces.¹⁷ The mission was achievable, but it resulted in the loss of eight servicemen killed in action and failure to rescue the hostages.¹⁸ In addition, the political embarrassment to President Carter was enormous.

Our subsequent experiences were no better. In January 1983, Army Brigadier General James Dozier was captured by the Red Brigade in Italy and, while the United States stood by, the Italian counterterrorist force rescued him unharmed.¹⁹ In October 1985, we were again incapable of conducting a recovery of hostages when the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro with more

than 400 passengers and crew was seized by terrorists and one American was executed. We eventually captured the terrorists by forcing their airplane to land in Sicily.²⁰ A similar situation occurred in June 1985 when a TWA flight was hijacked by Lebanese Shiite Moslem gunmen and an American sailor was executed. This time the Syrians negotiated the release of the hostages, a move that was successful because Israel consented to free 735 detainees.²¹ The Israeli policy on concessions to terrorists is similar to that of the United States. Yet, they understood the value of negotiations in such situations. In this instance, it was a wise choice.

In July, 1989 Lieutenant Colonel Higgins was executed by Shiite Hizballahs while we did nothing more than utter threats toward the perpetrators.²² We cannot help but speculate what might have occurred if we attempted to negotiate with his captors or, failing that, launched a raid to recover him. No matter how it had turned out, it could have been no worse for him than the actual result.

CHAPTER V

COMBAT RESCUES BY OTHER NATIONS

"Mister President?"

"Oh, hello Bill. I was just thinking that this situation is going to force me to make a decision, one way or the other, which will have significant future impact on how we deal with hostages. I must confess that I don't yet know what I want to do. Please, tell me about our Colonel."

"Very encouraging news, Sir. We have learned that the Parumphs have moved Colonel Forrest to a small complex next to a dry lake bed in the desert on the outskirts of a major city in Krasnovia. The lake is used as a landing strip and can handle C-130 aircraft. I believe that we have a good opportunity to get him back unharmed if we act quickly. Obviously, there is a degree of risk involved, but our guys have rehearsed this sort of thing a lot lately and we can be ready to go in twenty four hours."

"Gary, what do you think?" the President asked sincerely. Strazensky had upset him earlier because they were on opposite sides on this issue, but the General made sense when he talked.

"As the Secretary said, the mission is relatively simple. The key aspect is to get strategic reconnaissance on site to pinpoint the objective. It's the best way to ensure success of the raid." He continued, "I recommend that you tell the Parumphs you will review your decision to sell stingers to the Mohavians. That way we can get the time we need to emplace our deep reconnaissance to give us detailed information on the target. Once they're in place we can fly our special operations people in under the cover of darkness on HM-53 helicopters. They can air assault and fast rope into the compound, get the Colonel and exfiltrate back to Mohavia. However, the longer we wait trying to make a decision, the more likely our reconnaissance guys will be discovered, and the more difficult the mission becomes." the General intoned. "We either go now or we can forget it."

The President took all three men in with a withering stare. "I know what you're all thinking - that I'm afraid to take the risks necessary to rescue

your boy. Well, I'll tell you something. One military officer in the hands of some two-bit gangsters is not sufficient reason to launch an attack which may litter the desert with bodies and still not achieve the goal. Not with the record we have in these situations. My position stands with our habitual strategy. We formally protest to the United Nations, Krasnovia, and whoever else you think can help, but we don't negotiate. We wait this thing out."

"I understand, Sir," the Secretary of Defense responded with an unmistakable tone of resignation in his voice.

Strazensky shot a hard look at the Secretaries and then turned in the direction of the President. "Sir, you're being shortsighted. I know we've had little success in the past, but this time the conditions are ripe to get a hostage back on our terms. You have the opportunity to duplicate the great successes France, Israel, England, and even the Dutch have had in this situation."

The President looked out the window for a long time. Finally, he turned around and said, "Tell me about the Dutch...and the British...and the others, General. Come back after lunch and brief me on hostage rescues that have achieved success. And another thing, when you return, leave the chip on your shoulder back in the Pentagon if you don't mind. This is becoming a very difficult situation and I can do without your attitude."

Strazensky looked back over his shoulder on his way out the door and said, "I understand, Sir. I never really cared for tennis anyway."

The success rate of counterterrorist missions for nations other than the United States has been quite impressive. After the disastrous hostage rescue attempt at the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, the nations around the world began to realize that hostage taking was a legitimate threat to the welfare of their citizens. Many countries began to develop strategies for direct action which were effective in coping with such incidents. For

example, in February 1976, dissidents captured a school bus full of French children and held them hostage in Djibouti, Somalia. The French National Police, or GIGN, rescued 29 people with only one death.²² That Summer, the Royal Dutch Marines stormed a Train in Assen, Netherlands to free 110 hostages captured by South Moluccan terrorists with no loss of life.²⁴ This triumphant rescue was followed four months later by the well-known raid on Entebbe, Uganda conducted by the Israeli Defense Force which liberated 250 hostages with just four fatalities.²⁵

The string of successful combat rescues continued into 1977. In October, the German National Police, called GSG-9, rescued 9 airline passengers in Mogadishu, Somalia with no fatalities.²⁶ Three years later, the British Special Air Services Regiment rescued 26 personnel from the Iranian Embassy in London with no losses.²⁷

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

"...So you can see, Mister President, based on what other countries have accomplished, the opportunity for success in these situations is very realistic." Strazensky sat back in his seat and noticed that the back of his shirt was soaked. "Well," he thought, "at least I've had the opportunity to present my view."

"Bill or Don, help me out here," the President pleaded. "Gary makes a good case for direct action, but I remember the anguish that Carter endured his last year in office because he couldn't resolve the hostage situation in Iran. I don't want to end up in that position."

The Secretary of State spoke first, composing his thoughts as he went. He knew that his words would be influential when the President finally made his decision on this issue. "Sir, no one can guarantee that it won't happen to you, but we have got to develop a national policy that works. We must consider negotiating with terrorists for the sake of Colonel Forrest as well as for future hostages."

The Secretary of Defense added, "In addition, you should contemplate authorizing a rescue attempt in this case and any time in the offing if any possibility of success exists. And we can't discount retaliatory strikes after the captives have been released on those who conducted the seizure or the people who directed the act. If you authorize these actions, the country will have a reasonable chance to reduce the threat of terrorist actions against our citizens."

The President took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't know. If we just had more time, we could implement these initiatives and show the world how the United States deals with terrorism. But I'm afraid that it may be too late. I just don't know..."

The President had every reason to hesitate in making up his mind. The United States of America is the most powerful country on earth; yet, terrorists go about their business with little

concern about timely intervention by our Special Operations forces in hostage situations. Our national policy is simply too murky to properly determine how best to react to such circumstances.

The exceptional level of training of our counterterrorist forces should weigh heavily on our policy. Each member of Delta Force is a volunteer and only a fraction of those who step forward are ultimately selected. They are fully prepared to be employed against terrorists as hostage rescue and retaliatory strike forces whenever it is feasible to do so. The knowledge that Delta Force is a viable part of our counterterrorist strategy would be a great confidence builder for our military personnel, diplomats, and private citizens overseas.

The terrorist threat exists and will continue for the foreseeable future because of the potential to conduct their operations with almost no possibility of timely intervention by our counterterrorist units. If the President cannot envision employing these precious assets as they were envisioned, we need to adjust the forces, the policy, or both.

The most economical solution is to eliminate Delta Force from the Special Operations Command. This does not mean that we should completely step away from the possibility of hostage rescue. We could take the example of such countries as Germany and Great Britain which have given the mission to civilian agencies. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has the capability of being the lead agency for

hostage situations. They are trained in this area and, in coordination with local police forces, they could be a very effective force to combat terrorism in our country.

Outside the country, the State Department could assume a similar role. By working closely with host country anti-terrorist police units, it would be able to coordinate negotiations and, if necessary, supplement rescue operations with our Ranger units and Marines which train routinely to conduct short-notice hostage rescue missions. This would not be their top priority mission, as it is now for Delta Force, but the Rangers and Marines could provide highly skilled personnel to support the FBI or foreign police units. In addition, they could be the primary retaliatory mission force against terrorists, should it be directed.

A choice must be made. Our counterterrorist policy can be proactive and aggressive or it can be reactive and submissive. In order to be the former, the President must have the courage and confidence to approve the implementation of the strategy. We must not look at negotiations with terrorists as a sign of weakness on our part but as a legitimate means to resolve a hostage situation in our favor. At the same time, if the possibility of success exists, even if there is risk involved, we must plan and execute timely rescue operations as a matter of course. We can achieve the same level of success that other countries have enjoyed if we make a genuine commitment to the rescue. Also, we must be prepared to conduct retaliatory strikes

after the hostage situation is resolved by targeting either the captors or those who directed the act. Our intelligence systems must work to identify these people so that terrorists realize that their acts will not go unpunished, regardless of the short term outcome of the kidnaping of our citizens.

It appears that terrorism will continue to be a bona fide threat to the welfare of our citizens, diplomats, and military personnel in the future. We must do better than we have in the past to ensure the safety of these people by streamlining our rescue forces and by codifying our strategy. What will we do? The answer must come from the National Command Authorities.

CHAPTER VII

EPILOGUE

The three HM-53 Pave Low helicopters lifted off the airfield tarmac in a sea of transitional lift rotor wash. They climbed quickly to flight altitude, even though each was loaded with forty combat-ready Rangers prepared to carry out their mission with deadly efficiency. On order from the flight leader, the aircraft extinguished their external navigation lights and turned East, picking up speed as they streaked into Krasnovia...

NOTES

1. U.S. Special Operations Command, USCINCSOC Operational Concept, (MacDill AFB, FL: 28 July 1989), p. B-1.
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